

Promising Practice: Smart Start Program

Bergen Community College

Northern New Jersey Health Professions Consortium (NNJHPC)

Recipients of the Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG), funded by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance, know that each state requires a percentage of its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients to participate in specific activities for a minimum number of hours per week. These activities are categorized as essential, or "core," and secondary, or "non-core." While the core activity requirements help emphasize work, some TANF recipients see them as being irrelevant to their career objectives and delaying their entry into the workforce. In New Jersey, for instance, TANF recipients interested in pursuing training in healthcare may first be required to participate in community service, regardless of whether this service is healthcare related. Recognizing this issue, Bergen Community College (BCC), the lead member of the Northern New Jersey Health Professions Consortium (NNJHPC), initiated a "Smart Start" program which offers TANF recipients an introductory course in healthcare that also counts toward their core activity requirements.

Launching this Smart Start program began with the NNJHPC leadership team exploring the feasibility of using a residential "boot camp" model, a strategy that is being employed by a number of HPOG grantees. NNJHPC invited representatives from one such grantee, the South Carolina Department of Social Services, to share that program's boot camp strategies and experiences at a consortium-wide summit. Following this event, the ACF Regional TANF Program Manager coordinated a meeting with representatives from the New Jersey Division of Family Development (the state's TANF agency), New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, local Workforce Investment Board, and local One-Stop Career Center to discuss the possibility of adding a pre-training program that could help fulfill TANF requirements. By bringing these players to the table, the Consortium helped achieve buy-in and strengthen community partnerships. The end result: the BCC Smart Start curriculum was approved by BCC's local One-Stop and saw its first enrollments in September 2012.

A TANF recipient's first step toward enrolling in the Smart Start program occurs at the local Board of Social Services. On or about the first of each month, the Board refers TANF recipients to the Bergen County One-Stop to participate in G-Job, the One-Stop's WorkFirst job readiness program. During G-Job, clients receive a general orientation to the job search program and complete a battery of assessment activities. They are then presented with career options, and those who are qualified and interested are encouraged to apply to BCC's HPOG program. If accepted, these clients begin the Smart Start program on or about the first of the next month (up to 30 days after their initial referral to the One-Stop).

In its current form, Bergen's Smart Start program runs five days a week for four weeks, and attendance for the entire program is mandatory. An experienced nurse-educator hired by BCC specifically for the Smart Start program is responsible for the course and is the primary instructor, but approximately five visiting lecturers also lead courses during the four-week

period. Smart Start students participate in both a cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) certification and a first aid class which are taught by an additional pair of instructors.

The Smart Start curriculum provides an orientation to health career pathways and meets those work participation requirements placed on TANF recipients. As a result, clients who go through Smart Start are deemed to have fulfilled their community work experience (C-WEP) requirements and can directly enter training at the conclusion of Smart Start.

Uniformly, clients who complete Smart Start rave about the course and the month-long experience. They find themselves better prepared to begin their chosen vocational training and feel that the time has been well spent. To date, 98% of the 36 Smart Start clients have passed all of their occupational certifying or licensing exams, a significant performance improvement from Bergen's previous record. NNJHPC leadership expects that at least three other colleges in the consortium will adopt the curriculum this year.

When asked what they would recommend to other grantees considering programs similar to Smart Start, Bergen's leadership point to the importance of achieving buy-in from local faculty and One-Stop leadership during the course development process. They also acknowledge the value of hearing from the South Carolina Department of Social Services, and they welcome a visit from any HPOG grantee that would like to see NNJHPC's "nonresidential boot camp" in action.